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U.S. Quietly Rebuilds Links to Iran

Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, not Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, directs the world's most deadly terrorist network. Yet incredibly, the Reagan administration has begun a hush-hush, barely perceptible tilt toward Iran.

Take the question of hostages, for example. The implacable Khomeini, not Qaddafi, controls the fate of American hostages. Washington has been quietly conciliatory in the behind-the-scenes negotiations with Iran over the American hostages held by pro-Iranian terrorists.

This dramatic, subterranean shift in policy toward Iran goes beyond the fate of the hostages into the realm of global geopolitics. President Reagan has been persuaded by his advisers (though there are still dissenters) that an effort must be made to establish relations with Khomeini.

Their concern is that, without U.S. presence in Tehran, the Soviets may be tempted to occupy northern Iran during any post-Khomeini confusion or chaos. Asked about the warming-up with Iran, one high-level State Department official tacitly confirmed it by snapping: "We deal with the Soviet Union. We deal with Syria. So why not Iran?"

A clue to the surprising change in direction toward Iran can be detected by reading between the lines of Reagan's tough denunciations of Qaddafi. Reagan appears to hold Qaddafi primarily responsible for the murders of Americans at the Rome and Vienna airports last December, as well as for subsequent terrorist attacks.

However, the terrorist Abu Nidal is known to have masterminded the airport attacks and may

have engineered the later ones. Yet in 1983, when Iraq expelled him because it wanted better relations with the United States, Nidal went to Khomeini for help—and got it. Our sources estimate that the ayatollah gives Nidal about \$25 million a year for his murderous ventures.

In addition, we've seen a classified U.S. intelligence report to the effect that the Rome and Vienna assaults were approved by the foreign ministers of Iran, Syria and Libya at a meeting in Tripoli on Dec. 23. The three governments' intelligence chiefs oversaw the twin operation.

Nidal was spotted in East Berlin about the time of the discotheque bombing this month. Intelligence sources say he may have had a hand in the atrocity—probably on loan to Qaddafi from Khomeini.

Yet Reagan has singled out Libya as the source of all anti-American terrorism, even when evidence suggests Iran and Syria are at least equally guilty.

A senior White House official mentioned another inducement for rebuilding bridges to Iran: money. It costs a bundle to defend against the Iran-sponsored chaos. "We have one [sensitive] report that indicates we are spending \$10 [billion] to \$12 billion more than we would have to if relations with Iran were normal," he said.

The White House source said that Iranians in general, and even mainstream Shiites for that matter, are not as viscerally anti-American as they may seem. They have been stirred up by Khomeini to distract them from other troubles, such as the appalling slaughter of the war with Iraq and their declining living standards.